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UNESCO guidelines on intercultural education: A deconstructive reading

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This paper undertakes a deconstructive reading of the principles on intercultural education, as introduced and discussed by UNESCO in a document published in 2006. It proceeds from the argument that while these principles have attracted considerable empirical attention, much less is known about the basic ideological assumptions that UNESCO makes in the process of articulating each one of them in turn. With reference points drawn from Derrida's 1976 deconstruction strategy, the deconstructive reading reveals how the organisation, in spite of its major claims, actually erases difference through recommendations that seek to promote social cohesion and peace. That is, even though the UNESCO document supports throughout the right to be different, self and other still run the risk of becoming one and the same should they endorse the guiding principles proposed. The paper concludes with the broader implications that can be drawn from this reading to help continue discussions about intercultural education at the local and international standard-setting levels.

Keywords: principles on intercultural education; UNESCO; deconstructive reading; Derrida; difference; standard-setting

Introduction and background

Since its inception in 1945, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has engaged in a worldwide publishing programme that disseminates hundreds of advisory documents to educators every year. Among them, one can perhaps distinguish the UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education in which the pivotal role of education in promoting social cohesion and peace is most vehemently expressed:

> Education shall be directed to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial and religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. (UNESCO 2006, 8)

The starting point for the process that resulted in this document was a broad-based conference on inter-civilizational dialogue held in Rabat, Morocco, in June 2005. There, participants from more than 30 countries spoke about dangers that can arise from the absence of dialogue, and emphasised the need to raise awareness about cultural difference through a concrete set of practical initiatives. These initiatives, as UNESCO (2005) suggested in the same conference, would work towards developing a much stronger link between education and culture, so that conflicting cultural groups achieve a sustainable way of living together in multicultural societies. The principal assumptions behind this suggestion were that inter-culturalism goes far beyond passive coexistence, and that existing diversity policies have failed, not least because of their assimilatory character. Indeed, relevant research (e.g., Allport 1954; see also Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006) has explained how people from antagonistic groups acquire a relational understanding of the self when interacting with one another on equitable terms, concluding that assimilation does little to foster intergroup consensus.

Aware of that conclusion, participants in the Rabat conference encouraged UNESCO to devise a normative educational framework that would help tackle the challenges posed by assimilation policies in all United Nations member countries. Subsequently, the organisation published the *UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education* (2006) to set out how this goal can be achieved, particularly in contexts where culture-specific traditions conflict with universalising tendencies. Central to this publication, as its title suggests, are three guiding principles that together present what UNESCO views as an intercultural approach to education. Whereas the first principle refers to pedagogies that are responsive to the cultural identities of students, the other two focus on the ability to appreciate diversity after having developed community participation skills. Further to these suggested principles, the publication also referred to

key terms – e.g., ‘culture’, ‘multiculturalism’, ‘inter-culturalism’ – that arguably have escaped clear definition to date (see Guilherme and Dietz 2015 for a similar argument), as well as to milestone UNESCO instruments – e.g., *Declaration of Principles on Tolerance* (1995), *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001) – to name but two. The primary reason for this, Pigozzi (2006) believes, was to explain the general issues surrounding intercultural education to all who wish to put the guiding principles into practice.

To date, the UNESCO guidelines on intercultural education have attracted considerable empirical interest, with publications by no fewer than 20 scholars (see Dervin 2016 for an extensive review). Suárez, Ramirez and Koo (2009), for instance, explore actions taken to adopt the principles as components of an internationalising human rights project, whereas Shultz and Guimaraes-Iosif (2012) examine what they conceive of as the agentic disposition of teachers to create a healthy educational platform for citizenship through the guiding principles proposed. Yet, much less is known about the basic ideological tenets that underpin the three principles. This being the case, my aim in this paper is to undertake a deconstructive reading of each in order to expose some of the most fundamental assumptions UNESCO makes in its efforts to build mutual respect and dialogue across cultural divides. With reference points drawn from Derrida’s (1976) deconstruction strategy, the following reading reveals how the organisation, in spite of its major claims, actually erases difference through recommendations that seek to promote social cohesion and peace. That is, even though the UNESCO publication under scrutiny supports throughout the right to be different, self and other still run the risk of becoming one and the same should they endorse the guiding principles proposed.

The paper is organised in three sections. In the first, in order to ground my analysis of the suggested UNESCO principles I present the moves relevant to deconstructive

reading, as introduced and discussed by Derrida (1976) and other scholars (e.g., Caputo 1997; Critchley 1999). In the second, I turn to the analysis, focusing specifically on three key issues to which the principles explicitly or implicitly refer, namely: culture and culturally responsive teaching, citizen participation skills, and skills for appreciating difference and diversity. In the third and final section, I consider the broader implications and possible conclusions from my deconstructive reading to help continue discussions about intercultural education at the local and international standard-setting levels.

Derrida's deconstruction strategy

Deconstruction can be conceived as a notoriously slippery word that so far has escaped any real sense of scholarly definition (Lucy 2004). Miller (1987) and Zuckert (1991) contend it is a radical strategy of reading texts that suggest more than what they want to say, in order to take apart the metaphysical tradition from which all binary oppositions emerge. Sarup (1993) suggests that these oppositions do not coexist on equal grounds in that the first term of each pair (sameness, for example) has been privileged while the second (difference, for example) has been devalued. Therefore, the task of the deconstructing critic is to reverse the hierarchy, that is, to make the previously subordinate term the dominating one, before displacing the reversal from which another inequality would otherwise emerge and function. Still other scholars (e.g., Beardsworth 1996; Bennington 2005; Royle 2000) choose not to define deconstruction for fear of reducing the strategy to a set of transposable procedures or rules that can be applied systematically to the analysis of any given text. Indeed, as Derrida ([1987] 1991) has so persuasively explained in his *Letter to a Japanese Friend*,

> All sentences of the type "deconstruction is X" or "deconstruction is not X" *a priori* miss the point, which is to say that they are at least false. As you know, one of the principal things at stake in what is called in my texts "deconstruction" is precisely

> the delimiting of ontology and above all of the third person present indicative: S is P. (275)

According to Caputo (1997) and Critchley (1999), however, it is still possible to identify at least two 'motifs' or 'layers' of reading that convey the basic moves of deconstruction.

The first motif can be described as 'classical reading' in that it expects the reader to reproduce precisely what the text wants to say or mean without uncovering the contradictions that might be hiding within it. At its core, Culler (1983) and Norris (1987) observe, lies the philosophy of objectivist hermeneutics, which although diagnosing discrepancies between the surface and subtle content of texts, sets out to suppress them in the hope of finding a single unequivocal meaning. To explain how such hope can be sustained, Evans (1991) and Payne (1993) recount two principles that established accounts of hermeneutic theory have used to restore the contentious stability of the text. Whereas the first principle appeals to the cultural history of the time for evidence that will support a valid interpretation, the second checks the meaning that the author intends the text to have against all the evidence gathered. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) agree with this recount, and go on to discuss how hermeneuticists produce an interpretation that best represents the text even when large sets of supporting instances are missing. Their discussion centres on the idea that the text itself provides these instances, and that to ignore them one would risk projecting only the interpreter's preconceptions.

For his part, Derrida has also discussed the function and importance of these principles for conventional readers. In the afterword to *Limited Inc.* (1988), for instance, the philosopher speaks about the unavoidable necessity of paraphrasing precisely the so-called literate meaning of texts, and moves on to argue for a minimal competence in reading that respects both the entire corpus of an author and the historical circumstances that have produced it. Along similar lines, *The Work of Mourning* (2001) points to the

benefits of exact paraphrasing so that a text is interpreted according to the traditional instruments of commentary, and adds that without it, readers could say whatever comes into their heads. However, as Critchley (1999) is correct to point out, only in *Of Grammatology* (1976) does Derrida explain in detail the importance of this commentary for critical production. Indeed, in this text he writes:

> This moment of doubling commentary should no doubt have its place in a critical reading. To recognise and respect all its classical exigencies is not easy and requires all the instruments of traditional criticism. Without this recognition and this respect, critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorise itself to say almost anything. But this indispensable guardrail has always only *protected*, it has never *opened*, a reading. (Derrida 1976, 158, original emphasis)

Interpreters of this highly cited quotation argue that the doubling commentary constitutes the foothold from which deconstruction can take its first steps. Evans (1991), for example, notes that it is only because of the refined repetition that deconstruction has something to transgress, and, as such, insists on passing through the classical discipline even if this discipline is not as rigorous as it claims to be. In a similar manner, Caputo (1997) and Critchley (1999) admit and promote the values of tradition only in order to subvert them afterwards. So, like Spivak (1976, lxxv) before them, they go so far as to liken reading to 'those X-ray pictures which discover, under the epidermis of the last painting, another hidden picture'. This analogical metaphor concurs with Derrida (1978, 369), who suggests that 'there are thus two interpretations of interpretation' interweaving deconstruction: one that affirms the original meaning placed in the text by the author, and another one that disrupts the affirmation that the first interpretation affords. In his thesis, however, Derrida is also cautious to clarify that the first interpretation is affected by the context within which a text is read, and, therefore, constitutes neither a pure nor a simple reproduction of the authorial or textual intention (Derrida 1988).

The second motif of reading that Caputo (1997) and Critchley (1999) identify in their respective essays can be described as ‘deconstructive reading’. This involves a detailed comparison of what the author commands and does not command in the text being commented upon to reveal those moments of self-contradiction that the conventional commentary neglects or hides. McQuillan (2000) argues that these moments do not arise from some world whose content could have taken place outside of language, but rather they exist within the structure to be deconstructed. This is so because that structure in itself is inherently unstable, and that its instability depends heavily on all those incidental turns of argument that render the text’s conclusions problematic (see also Johnson 1981; Leitch 1983; Norris 1987; Payne 1993). Derrida (1997) is also in favour of remaining within the text when arguing that deconstruction works always from the inside. Yet, he takes the argument further to suggest that this work cannot escape the tradition of metaphysics, although this is precisely the tradition that the strategy wants to contest, and to write a deconstructive critique of it one needs to use the language that the metaphysical system has made available to the conventional critic.

Returning now to the binary oppositions on which the strategy focuses (see Sarup 1993 above), it should be noted that Derrida is not interested simply in reversing the order of opposite terms, but in settling in the distance between them (Caputo 1997). Otherwise, Norris (1987) argues, deconstruction would fall back into the familiar dialectical routine of elevating one term at the expense of the other and do nothing to disrupt the unity that the text claims for itself. To suggest how this unity can be disrupted, Derrida (1973) coins the noun *différance* from the French verb ‘différer’, and goes on to identify two ways in which this noun can be understood:

> On the one hand, it indicates difference as distinction, inequality, or discernibility; on the other hand, it expresses the interposition of delay, the interval of a *spacing*

> and *temporalizing* that puts off until "later" what is presently denied, the possible that is presently impossible. Sometimes the *different* and the *deffered* correspond [in French] to the verb "to differ." This correlation, however, is not simply one between act and object, cause and effect, or primordial and derived. (129, original emphasis)

In explaining the key idea behind this quotation, McQuillan (2000) and Trifonas (2000) focus attention on the double meaning that the verb 'différer' carries in French. They argue that because in French this verb means not only 'to defer' but also 'to differ', *différance* must then involve both actions of time and of spacing simultaneously. According to them, these actions suffice to undo the binary oppositions of metaphysics in that, in the process of associating *différance* with both of its component parts, they produce a fissure of endless differentiation that prevents any word from having a single decidable meaning. So, this is, perhaps, the reason that Derrida (1981, 24) has for referring to *différance* as 'the systematic play of differences', adding that what might appear as fully present and self-sufficient is nothing but a past and/or future trace that sets the work of signification infinitely in motion. Yet, as the philosopher also suggests somewhat guardedly, this work invites the deconstructing critic not to erase altogether the oppositions that the metaphysical tradition has made available, but to re-inscribe them in such a way that will effectively disable one from choosing between opposing terms.

Since deconstruction reveals how texts say the opposite of what they are commonly taken to mean, the aim of the next section is to identify and discuss the contradictions inherent in the UNESCO publication under scrutiny. The discussion pays equal attention to the surface and to the subtle content of this publication, producing a deconstructive reading that subverts the guiding principles on which intercultural education ought to be founded. In so doing, it operationalises the concept of *différance* in ways that allow meaning to emerge not through a direct correspondence between dominant and subordinate terms, but through multiple references to other texts from

which one might then become better able to evaluate whether UNESCO supports difference. To enable this evaluation, however, the discussion will reconstruct the preferred meaning of the publication when introducing each of the principles concerned, in much the same way as it does with intercultural education in the opening paragraph of the section that follows.

Towards a deconstruction of the UNESCO principles on intercultural education

Intercultural education, in its broadest sense, can be understood as a multi-faceted field of educational theory and practice that has developed out of conflicting curriculum policies, institutional strategies and pedagogic approaches intending to target diverse student populations (Gundara 2000). Most theorists share the view that it is:

> An educational approach based on respect for and recognition of cultural diversity, aimed at every member of society as a whole, that proposes an intervention model, formal and informal, holistic, integrated and encompassing all dimensions of the educational process in order to accomplish a real equality of opportunities/results, to promote intercultural communication and competency, and to overcome racism in all its expressions. (Aguado 1995, in Aguado and Malik 2001, 150)

Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) focus attention on the antiracist component of this definition and on the ways in which different axes of power conduct their oppressive work. They argue that because this work often goes unnoticed, the aim of intercultural education is to instil a critical consciousness in students that will in turn enable them to take charge of their worlds. Banks (2006) has also commented extensively on this definition, particularly in a publication that links intercultural education to the emancipation of minority groups. Specifically, Banks suggests that the school curriculum has for too long rendered these groups invisible, and that without deliberate interventions student motivation and self-esteem are likely to decrease. For these interventions to be

effective, however, Banks and McGee Banks (2009) theorise that teachers must work with multicultural textbooks and materials that disrupt the dominant power relationships in society, and, as such, help create classrooms that give voice to the histories and experiences of all students. This is also the stated view of UNESCO (2006), which constructs the first principle of intercultural education on the basis of this theorisation, therefore arguing for pedagogies that respect all learners regardless of cultural or other affiliation.

Principle I: Intercultural Education respects the cultural identity of the learner through the provision of culturally appropriate and responsive quality education for all[1]

This first UNESCO principle of intercultural education derives largely from the field of culturally responsive teaching. Defined by Gay (2002) and Ladson-Billings (1997) as a critical form of pedagogic practice that battles against assimilationist school curricula and ideologies, culturally responsive teaching enables students to appreciate their diverse identities by making use of the everyday experiences they bring into the classroom learning environment. One of the principal influences behind this utilisation, Ladson-Billings (1995) asserts, was the work of Paulo Freire (1970) in his now seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this text, the author formulates the problem-posing method of instruction, whereby it becomes possible for teachers to enter into dialogue with their students, and identifies two consequent stages in the practice of the problem-posing educator. Whereas the first stage raises awareness of the subtle and often hidden processes that continue to keep status hierarchies alive and intact, the second speaks critically unto power by cultivating in students the closely intertwined abilities of reflection and action. At the heart of both these abilities, Sleeter (2012) explains, lies the non-essentialist view of culture that conceptualises it as inherently processual and shifting, and, therefore,

irreducible to stable characteristics assumed to be shared by members of a group.

Although this first principle aligns explicitly with culturally responsive teaching, UNESCO does not appear to subscribe fully to the non-essentialist view of culture that comes with the field. Thus, in spite of favouring curricula that convey 'the plural, dynamic, relative and complementary nature of cultures' (38), the dominant idea in the 2006 document describes culture as a homogeneous attribute that 'shapes our frames of reference, our ways of thinking and acting, our beliefs and even our feelings' (13). This idea is, perhaps, mostly evident in the following quotation, where the organisation provides one definition of culture that arguably contradicts the fluidity to which culturally responsive teaching refers:

> [Culture] has been defined as the whole set of signs by which the members of a given society recognise one another, while distinguishing them from people not belonging to that society. […] Culture is at the core of individual and social identity and is a major component in the reconciliation of group identities within a framework of social cohesion. In discussing culture, reference is made to all the factors that pattern an individual's ways of thinking, believing, feeling and acting as a member of society. (UNESCO 2006, 12)

Considering this definition, it can be inferred that UNESCO promotes a rather unified notion of culture which, as suggested by many intercultural theorists (see Díaz and Dasli 2017 for a discussion), finds its strongest expression in the essentialist view. According to this view, culture is abstracted from the discourse context of interaction and instead consists of one or more defining characteristics that shape and penetrate the members of a national or ethnic group, as if they are all the same (Holliday 1999). Because these characteristics are seen to be passed from one generation to the next (Gjerde 2004), they gradually habituate individuals to certain patterns of acceptable behaviour – e.g., high/low power distance forms of address, high/low context communication styles – that are in turn

applied largely without thought to a wide range of everyday tasks, thereby becoming responsible for many of the communication breakdowns that cultures experience when they come into contact with each another. For this reason, proponents of the essentialist view (e.g., Hofstede 2001; Nisbett 2003; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 2004) argue that to bridge the gap between different cultural groups, one first needs to understand sufficiently their own culture and the culture of others.

While many may suggest that the essentialist view does much to reconcile the differences between groups, it has also been critiqued for being 'reductionist' and 'stereotypical' (Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman 2004). Holliday (2005, 2011, 2013), for example, was among the first scholars to argue against the one-on-one mapping of culture onto nation, explaining that it neglects the importance of agency in cultural life. In Dasli (2011) I too have critiqued the essentialist view for the nation-driven conceptualisation of culture it arguably promotes. To combat the problematic idea that culture provides the means through which people can act, I invoke Anderson (1983, 6) in stating that 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them', and, therefore, cannot be unified under a dominant representational paradigm. A similar perspective, from the field of Cultural Studies, has also been offered by Hall (2002, 26), who argues that 'each person draws selectively on a variety of discursive meanings', and that this selection can no longer preserve and keep a single culture intact. On this argument, the question as to which cultural identity of the learner intercultural education respects may legitimately arise.

Also related to this question is the extent to which problem-posing instruction successfully engages teachers and students in a dialogic partnership with each other. For example, it has been recognised for at least two decades that this instruction directs students towards certain pre-determined goals, thereby privileging the aims and

perspectives of only particular groups and not of others (Ellsworth 1989). Indeed, Burbules and Berk (1999) have argued that the problem-posing method constitutes another mechanism of oppression that hides well behind the alluring goals of emancipation and democracy, and, so, makes possible a situation in which students learn to internalise their oppression without being consciously forced to do so. Their argument concurs with Freedman (2007), who associates this method of instruction with classroom settings that make authentic dialogue impossible. In particular, Freedman contends that classrooms can never achieve ideal speech conditions, because the function of much argumentation is to convince others of one's own opinions, and goes on to suggest that it may be useful to look back at the foregoing critiques before making a pedagogic decision. Historically, however, this suggestion is positioned after the UNESCO 2006 document, which states that 'dialogue between students of different cultures [can lead to] mutual understanding and a truer and more perfect knowledge of each other's lives (8).

Principle II: Intercultural Education provides every learner with the cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to achieve active and full participation in society

The second UNESCO principle of intercultural education derives from the field of citizenship education. This is concerned with exploring the key processes and skills that young people need to develop in order to participate in mainstream society as informed, critical and responsible citizens (Breslin and Dufour 2006). Osler and Starkey (2005) have identified three mutually reinforcing dimensions that show how citizenship is performed in modern democratic states: status, feeling and practice. Whereas the first dimension points to the relationship of the individual to the nation state by focusing on the rights conferred on citizens in return for certain obligations, the remaining two reflect the emotional attachment that people feel for a specific community when joining with

others for political or other purposes. However, the sense of precisely which community a citizen belongs to has become increasingly complex, especially in multicultural locales where the distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' is still apparent (Kymlicka 2003). Kymlicka and Norman (2000), for instance, contend that ethnic minority groups form their own political communities alongside the larger society as a way of preserving their distinct identities, while Banks (2004) argues that majorities have not, as yet, learnt to engage with the cultures that they recognise as different from their own.

An initial attempt to bridge the gap between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' has been made by scholars who view the teaching of history as 'an essential constituent in the making of citizens' (Ross and Roland-Lévy 2003, 11). Both Kallis (2003) and Banks (2012), for example, discuss how history education can help promote more plural and multi-faceted perspectives in classroom situations where equality and difference are celebrated, and note that it is important for students to maintain attachments to their own cultural communities before reaching out to others. In their thesis, however, they also emphasise that such attachments often remain unresponsive to the development of parallel loyalties, as 'any programme of history education for citizenship is open to manipulation by the nation state' (Bamber 2010, 110). For this reason, in an interview conversation with three intercultural pedagogues, Ford (2013) proposes that feelings of belonging should be best cultivated in out-of-school contexts, where the practice of citizenship provides a training ground for the re-evaluation of contemporary historical developments. This accords with the perspective held by Osler and Starkey (2003), who carried out research with young people in Leicester. They found that the multiple sites within which citizenship was performed encouraged participants to view history as increasingly dialectical and transgressive.

Cognisant of this discussion, UNESCO (2006) proposes to 'implement special measures in contexts where historical backlogs limit the ability of learners to participate as equals with everyone else in society' (35). I argue, however, that this implementation can be compromised significantly by the development of civic competence. Indeed, Barnett (1994) suggested as early as in 1994 that this competence reflects certain kinds of dominant interest, and that its acquisition contains a routine element that stands outside participating students. Similarly, Biesta (2009) pointed out that the skills that make up this competence insert individuals into a particular way of doing and being, and, so, achieve nothing more than contributing to the reproduction of the existing political order. To make his point clearer, Biesta also differentiated between the *socialisation* and *subjectification* functions of education, explaining that whereas the first function sees civic learning in terms of the acquisition of given identities, the second can be thought of as enabling young people to become citizens in their own right. Thus, the crucial question that emerges for Biesta is whether the idea of education for citizenship allows for forms of learning that support political agency, or whether it remains content with channelling the citizen into a very specific direction.

To exemplify how UNESCO has reified its perspective on civic learning over time, I draw attention to a more recent document (see UNESCO 2014) in which the organisation promises to resolve some of the conceptual tensions that continue to occupy the field of citizenship education. Here, UNESCO argues that 'the complex and challenging nature of citizenship education should be seen as a strength rather than as a weakness' (18), and that 'if competitiveness is encouraged as a trait of citizenship, it will build the capacity of learners to survive, thrive and improve the world we live in' (19). To explain how this capacity can be built, the organisation also provides one example of

‘an innovative intervention’ (19), where the field of education for employment is the central focus:

> Education for Employment’s (EFE) mission is to create economic opportunities for unemployed youth in the Middle East and North America by providing world-class professional and technical training that leads directly to jobs and entrepreneurship support. EFE instils competitive skills at an individual level to maximise employability, whilst also instilling values of civic engagement and global citizenship. There is a focus on building non-cognitive skills, such as tolerance, empathy, respect and solidarity, and successful alumni are encouraged to ‘give back’ through mentoring, community work and other forms of civic engagement. (UNESCO 2014, 19)

Undoubtedly one could argue that this intervention is as innovative as UNESCO projects it to be, given the focus on such forms of civic engagement as ‘mentoring’ and ‘community work’. However, what appears to remain problematic is that it still inserts students into the order of citizenship that pays little attention to the political and collective processes of civic learning. This can be detected, perhaps, in the second and third sentences of the quotation where emphasis is placed on the ‘competitive skills’ that ‘successful alumni’ need to acquire before turning into active citizens, and on the idea that these skills should be developed ‘at an individual level’. Furthermore, the relevant literature (e.g., Giddens 2002) suggests the skills that maximise employability may not always guarantee employment, particularly when positions requiring these skills are literally non-existent. Because of this, one can invest only very little in the common good. More crucial to the present discussion, therefore, is the kind of solidarity these skills enable students to demonstrate once they turn into active citizens. Indeed, O’Regan and MacDonald (2007) argue that problems do arise when agents contest the socio-political order within which they have been socialised, thereby making the situation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ once again possible.

Principle III: Intercultural Education provides all learners with cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills that enable them to contribute to respect, understanding and solidarity among individuals, ethnic, social, cultural and religious groups and nations

The third UNESCO principle of intercultural education derives from cosmopolitan social theory. This theory has recently seen a major move away from the idea of cosmopolitanism as a transnational republican order with its own universal laws and juridico-political superstructures towards the notion of 'outward openness' (Skrbiš and Woodward 2013). Outward openness emphasises 'the ability of the agent to hear and see the cultural Other with empathy and respect' (Sobré-Denton and Bardhan 2013, 174), and encourages cosmopolitans to create a dynamic space of interaction, a 'third culture' (Restivo 1991), from which to connect the local with the global. At its core lie the hermeneutics of cross-cultural understanding, which for Appiah (2006, 57) assume that 'all cultures have enough overlap in their vocabulary of values to begin a conversation'. Delanty (2006) clearly supports this assumption when asserting that cosmopolitan orientations do not arise out of external conditions, and elsewhere notes that 'the self-transformative drive to re-make the world' is what provides the basic direction for cosmopolitanism (Delanty 2009, 76). For Benhabib (2004), this drive can be seen predominantly in situations that recognise the right of all beings to participate as equals in conversation, making dialogic ethics an essential pre-requisite for the development of a cosmopolitan world society (Benhabib and Post 2006).

As I have explained above, UNESCO has underscored the importance of intercultural dialogue for peaceful coexistence in a series of standard-setting instruments. In the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001), for instance, the organisation argues passionately that only dialogue enables people to live harmoniously together, and discusses how the absence of it can cultivate a climate of suspicion and tension between

diverse groups. Similarly, the *UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education* (2006) under scrutiny here point to the benefits and dangers associated with dialogue and non-dialogue respectively, adding that dialogic talk requires one to acquire a reflexive disposition towards other cultures and civilizations. To explain how this disposition can be acquired, UNESCO also proposes to design curricula that develop, among others, the following three dimensions of intercultural competence:

- Understanding and respect for all peoples; their cultures, civilizations, values and ways of life; including domestic ethnic cultures and cultures of other nations (37);
- Awareness of one's own cultural values that underlie the interpretation of situations and problems as well as the ability to reflect on and review information enriched by the knowledge of different cultural perspectives (37);
- The acquisition of techniques of observation, sympathetic listening and intercultural communication (38).

Yet, it becomes apparent here that the problems associated with essentialism return in the articulation of the aforementioned dimensions. For example, the first dimension equates culture with nation or ethnic group as if people cannot step outside their designated cultural territories, whereas the second implies that problems will be resolved as soon as individuals reflect on and review the knowledge they have acquired about their own and others' values. While this knowledge again may to some extent prove helpful for differentiating one group from another, as Holliday (2011, 4) points out correctly, it is only a short distance from such chauvinistic statements as 'in Middle Eastern culture there is no concept of individualised critical thinking', and, therefore, can be used as an excuse for colonising the third culture that cosmopolitans are encouraged to construct in the process of negotiating diverse identities. Moreover, research findings (e.g., Aman 2013;

Blasco 2012) reveal that the techniques of observation, as articulated in the third dimension of intercultural competence above, do not always result in harmonious encounters. This is particularly so when these encounters are preceded by courses that depict cultures as homogeneous and monolithic. For example, in a study that included classroom observations and interviews with students attending one such course (Dasli 2012), I found participants who engaged in blatant out-group stereotyping as a consequence of the non-negotiable set of facts they were invited to memorise.

At the same time, the dimensions of intercultural competence have also been critiqued for too heavily emphasising sameness at the expense of difference. From a cosmopolitan perspective, Todd (2009, 4), for example, directs attention to such common appeals as 'recognising our shared humanity', and describes how the other can become a mirror reflection of the same in dialogic exchanges that promote social cohesion and peace. Lipari (2012) also sees problems with the dimensions concerned when arguing that they pass over listening in favour of speaking. More specifically, Lipari contends that speaking transforms duality into unity, however loud the voice of difference can be, and critiques intercultural competence for limiting the possibilities of expression that listening makes available. This contention is echoed by Ferri (2014), who compares the aforementioned dimensions to the Levinasian constructs of the *said* and the *saying*. She explains that whereas the first construct suppresses the other by bringing it into the self's sphere of familiarity, the second preserves the essential strangeness of both from an irreducible distance. With this distinction in mind, Ferri goes on to suggest that the dimensions of intercultural competence operate within the category of the *said*, concluding that they promote tolerance of, rather than responsibility for, the other.

That tolerance occupies a central place in the work of UNESCO is evident in both the 2006 document under scrutiny, where emphasis is upon becoming 'tolerant of each

other's ways of being' (8), and in the organisation's associated declaration (see UNESCO 1995). However, what this work tends to overlook is that this concept has become the object of powerful critique. To be more specific, toleration theorists (e.g., Galeotti 2002; McKinnon 2006) note that tolerance conceals an asymmetric relation of power between the tolerator and the tolerated, which reveals itself only when the stronger party chooses not to interfere with the disapproved behaviour. Thus, in their analysis of the issues surrounding toleration, these theorists make the point that tolerance may not be the best approach to accommodating cultural difference because of the so-called ethical paradox in which the concept finds itself caught. Such is also the view of Jones (2010) and myself (Dasli 2017), who studied the limits of tolerance in relation to controversial cases of intolerable conduct. Jones and I have argued that the satirical treatment of sacred religious figures, for example, may not be tolerated even by those who accept the robust criticism of their faith, concluding that the issue of intolerance is too large to be settled by the ideal of toleration alone.

Perhaps, with the exception of essentialism, there is much shared ground between citizenship education and cosmopolitan social theory. Indeed, Osler and Starkey (2005) have argued that political belonging is not necessarily tied to a single nation, and that citizenship in a globalised world needs to be understood as a multi-layered construct. Delanty (2000) has also discussed the relationship of education to cosmopolitan citizenship, suggesting that the contexts in which we educate for citizenship must ideally abandon the distinction between 'friend' and 'foe' for a discourse that prioritises equality in dignity and in universal human rights. Regrettably, however, this priority is usually driven by an implicit desire for wholeness; while it provides for the development of egalitarian world societies, it simultaneously risks erasing the difference between self and other. As MacDonald and O'Regan (2013) put it best,

> The ontological impetus towards transculturalism in the form of an integrated human consciousness simultaneously implies closure, finitude and the resolution of difference within what is supposed to be an antimonic intercultural terrain. In other words, by presupposing 'oneness', human rights discourse systematically effaces the premise of its own ontology – the irreducible relation to the other. Thus, by means of the passage from the many to the one, intercultural education brings about its own dissolution. (1008)

The foregoing deconstructive reading has explained how this dissolution can be brought about by identifying three contradictions that were seen to disrupt the preferred meaning of the UNESCO principles of intercultural education. The first referred to the essentialist view of culture whereby it becomes possible to group people under a seemingly homogeneous cultural unit, despite the stated claim of respecting their heterogeneity. The second directed attention to one 'innovative' educational intervention, which although claiming to locate civic learning at the political end of the citizenship spectrum, adhered to the socialisation rather than to the subjectification function of education. The third contradiction, by extension, revealed how the problems with essentialism return in the dimensions of intercultural competence by pointing to possible chauvinistic statements and intercultural education courses that treat cultures as coherent wholes. The next section deals with the broader implications and conclusions that can be drawn from this reading, to provide the paper with a provisional ending.

Implications and conclusions

To start my discussion of possible implications, it may be worth recalling that the aim of deconstruction is not to resolve the contradictions that can be found within a given text, but to oscillate between them in such a way that one becomes incapable of deciding easily on either. Indeed, Derrida (1995) has been extremely clear on this when suggesting:

> The only attitude (the only politics – juridical, medical, pedagogical, and so forth) I would *absolutely* condemn is one which, directly or indirectly, cuts off the possibility of an essentially interminable questioning, that is, an effective and thus transforming questioning. (239, original emphasis)

Albeit implicitly, intercultural research has also stressed the importance of oscillating infinitely between opposed terms, because contextual issues could make the application of any decision practically unjust (Dasli and Díaz 2017). Endres (2002), for example, has discussed how 'sameness-based' and 'difference-based' pedagogies undermine their intents in arguing that whereas the first pedagogy overlooks the particular history of students in its effort to treat everyone equally, the second exaggerates differences by replacing one member of a group with a seemingly identical other. The discussion of possible implications here echoes Endres' argument. So, rather than proposing to reduce the distance between the two pedagogies by, perhaps, utilising the intercultural skills and competences that UNESCO celebrates, my suggestion is to preserve their contestable features for fear of eradicating the radical alterity of both self and other. Indeed, Bauman (1993) pointed out over 25 years ago that the reduction of that distance is precisely what construes the other as knowledge, and that knowledge is not acquired from one's unique singularity, but from the group to which he or she is thought to belong. Claiming, after UNESCO (2006), that observation suffices to foster respect towards newcomers is therefore not only a misleading suggestion, but is also a means of assimilating the other into the expanding culture of the same.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the UNESCO 2006 document depicted culture not as a site of discursive struggle between competing groups, but as a largely neutral and apolitical construct from which to generate easily shared modes of dialogic expression. That is, although the authoring organisation makes some reference to the different power interests and ideologies that people negotiate in the process of recreating their hybridised

identities, the document soon turned these people into passive consumers of a culture, and, therefore, capable of preserving, rather than dismantling, rigid cultural dichotomies and expectations. Perhaps, then, the argument made by Holliday (2011) and Sleeter (2012) with respect to the academy's tendency of returning to the dominant approach to the study of culture may be highly relevant here, in that it shows how UNESCO slips back into questionable national/cultural descriptions, while claiming to support a more liberal and less essentialist view. Given this tendency, it may therefore be worth proposing not to dismiss these problematic descriptions out of hand, but to consider how they came to prevail and what purpose they serve for people who attach meaning to them.

In my opinion, such considerations constitute an important part of deconstruction because, in addition to keeping the space between same and other infinitely open, they also turn a sceptical eye towards the programmatic application of rules. Indeed, as Derrida (2004) explains in an essay that sets out the consequences of such an application for responsibility and justice,

> Whenever I have at my disposal a determinable rule, I know what must be done, and as soon as such knowledge dictates the law, action follows knowledge as a calculable consequence: one *knows* what path to take, one no longer hesitates. The decision then no longer decides anything but is made in advance and is thus in advance annulled. It is simply deployed, without delay, presently, with automatism attributed to machines. There is no longer any place for justice or responsibility (whether juridical, political, or ethical). (329-330, original emphasis)

Therefore, unthinkingly applying the suggested UNESCO principles of intercultural education to any context, irrespective of complexity or simplicity, not only ignores the progressively evolving moments around which classroom teaching revolves. It also obstructs the kind of transforming questioning that each and every pedagogue has to undertake in the process of reflecting in ever new ways on the ethical problem of

difference. The present paper contributed but one effort towards such a reflection by bringing the UNESCO 2006 document in contradiction with itself. In this way, the deconstructive reading I have undertaken here was able to suggest that UNESCO may not respect difference as much as it would like to think, and that because of this the proposed principles risk jeopardising the irreducible relationship between self and other. Nevertheless, given what scholars of deconstruction (e.g., Critchley 1999; McQuillan 2000) have convincingly said about each reading of the same text being unique and unrepeatable, it is pertinent to invite readers to undertake their own deconstruction of the UNESCO document, and to identify themselves contradictions that I may have failed to recognise. In extending this invitation, I aim to help continue discussions about intercultural education at the local and international standard-setting levels, especially if these discussions result in the deconstructive reading of my own paper, which I now bring to a close.

Notes

1. For the purpose of this deconstructive reading, I quote verbatim the suggested UNESCO principles of intercultural education, as they appear on p. 32 of the 2006 document.

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